



Group: Site helps state earn A- in financial transparency

by **Ginger Rough** - Mar. 18, 2011 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

Arizona officials have made great strides in making information about government spending more available to the public, though there is still room for further improvement, a public-advocacy group said this week.

The Arizona Public Interest Research Group on Wednesday released a report in which it gave the state an A- for its transparency efforts, largely due to the launch of a new website, openbooks.az.gov, which provides details about how much state agencies are spending and where the money went.

This is the second year Arizona PIRG has produced its report, called Following the Money 2011: How the States Rank on Providing Online Access to Government Spending Data. Its release comes during Sunshine Week, a national celebration of open government and freedom of information.

Last year, the state received a failing grade for transparency in government spending.

"Arizona deserves credit for taking a significant leap forward with the creation (of the new website)," said Serena Unrein, a public-interest advocate at Arizona PIRG.

The new website went live in December and allows users to search for spending figures by state agency or by transaction.

It also contains audit reports and financial-outlook information, plus graphs and charts showing where the state's general fund gets its revenue. Information is available for fiscal 2009 through fiscal 2011.

The site cost \$50,000 to develop, said Clark Partridge, the state's comptroller and the official responsible for the site's development.

Unrein said the state could further improve its transparency efforts by adding information about grants and the economic-development incentives it awards.

"There's still plenty of room to improve government-budget transparency," she said.

For example, the state's website does not contain information about proposed spending, which has been a point of major contention in recent days.

Community advocates and others sharply criticized Senate Republicans this week for their speedy action on the budget. GOP officials released an \$8.1 billion budget plan on Tuesday night and passed it out of their chamber on Wednesday evening.

"We should have at least a few days to vet all of this stuff and know the thousands of people who will be affected," Tim Schmaltz of the Protecting Arizona's Family Coalition said Wednesday.

Republic reporter Mary Jo Pitzl contributed to this article.

Read more:

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/election/azelections/articles/2011/03/18/20110318arizona-financial-transparency-grade.html#ixzz1HLKkm3oi>